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WHA/CEN FOR KRAFT; INL/LP FOR AHERN; INL/CIV FOR STOLWORTHY

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TAGS: [ES](#) [KCRM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: EL SALVADOR MOVES BACKWARDS ON PRISON REFORM

REF: SAN SALVADOR 507

Classified By: Charge Robert Blau for reasons 1.4(B) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Newly-appointed Director of the Salvadoran prison system (DGCP in Spanish) Douglas Moreno has instituted several controversial changes since taking office June 2. The tenor of the changes, coupled with an apparent unwillingness to meet with Embassy officials, creates problems for INL-funded prison reform efforts in El Salvador. Law enforcement cooperation with the new government of El Salvador (GOES) is going to have to proceed with more caution, as we gauge the intentions and seriousness of the new GOES. End summary.

¶2. (C) On June 2 Douglas Moreno, a lawyer who had previously worked on parole at the Salvadoran Supreme Court, was appointed Director of the DGCP. Moreno replaced Gilbert Caceres, an ARENA-appointee with whom INL San Salvador had established a close, confidential relationship over the previous two years, to include training in the U.S. and El Salvador, and exchange visits with the corrections systems of the states of New Mexico, California, and Colorado. Immediately upon taking office, Moreno publicly announced that he had "liberalized" security conditions within the Salvadoran prison system, and conducted "consultations" with prisoners and their families regarding additional proposed changes.

¶3. (SBU) In subsequent media interviews, Moreno reiterated his intention to further "liberalize" conditions within Salvadoran prisons, specifically loosening of security controls at El Salvador's maximum security prison at Zacatecoluca, granting greater access to family members and other visitors throughout the system, and eliminating vestiges of regimentation such as prisoner uniforms. Moreno additionally stated that he intends to increase the number of Salvadoran prisoners eligible for "conditional release" (a rough equivalent of parole), and to terminate ongoing construction projects intended to significantly increase correctional capacity at Izalco and other prisons. (Note: El Salvador's prison system is currently estimated to be at least 300 percent over capacity. End note.)

¶4. (C) Moreno has to date declined two Embassy requests to meet with him and discuss the possibility of continuing cooperation with INL on prison reform. A holdover contact still on the DGCP Institutional Development staff, who has also attempted to broker an introductory meeting between INL and Moreno, told poloff that Moreno has dismissed cooperation with INL out of hand, and that Moreno's key assistant stated "I don't want to hear another (expletive deleted) word about working with the (expletive deleted) gringos."

¶5. (C) Comment: The course changes so far at DGCP are troubling. Whether intentional or not, the reforms Moreno has already implemented will go a long way towards unraveling the significant progress INL has achieved in partnership with Caceres and company over the last two years. El Salvador's

prison system, with over 18,000 inmates, is a primary nexus of street gang violence and transnational organized crime. Loosening security controls at the prisons that incarcerate at minimum 6,000 estimated hard-core MS-13 and M-18 street gang members currently in the system will grant dangerous criminals increased operational space, as well as access to smuggled cell phones, cell phone chips, weapons, and drugs. Extortion calls, orders to carry out kidnappings and assassinations, and other organized criminal activity radiating out of the prison system will likely increase. Prison staff will also be at greater risk of violence, and even more vulnerable to intimidation, extortion, and bribery attempts.

16. (C) The Director's "consultations" with prisoners and their family members are effectively giving MS-13 and M-18 veto power over security practices at El Salvador's prisons, and encouraging prisoners and their outside advocates to push for further "reforms" that will undermine security system-wide. Moreover, Moreno appears intent, at least at this stage, to curtail collaboration with the USG on prison reform. The resolution of this impasse with DGCP will have an impact on implementation of the Merida Initiative in El Salvador. End comment.
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